

## A Bit of String: Rebecca West on Henry James

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In the summer of 1916, a slim, blue volume appeared in the bookstores. The cover carried two names: Henry James and Rebecca West. One was the title, and the other was the author. James had died in February of that year, worn out by a lifetime of literary production--novels and novellas, short stories by the score, critical essays, reviews, and translations. He had recently been awarded the Order of Merit for his services to Literature, only the third novelist ever to receive such an honor from the British Crown. Admittedly, sales of James's books had not been high in recent years. Yet, his name still commanded recognition and respect on both sides of the Atlantic--although, as will become apparent, it would not be entirely correct to say that this respect was universal. Rebecca West, on the other hand, had never written a book before. People with literary interests might have recognized her name, not necessarily because they had read her work but because it was a pseudonym borrowed from a radical, freethinking character in Henrik Ibsen's play Rosmersholm (1886). A number of established authors, including James's friend Mrs. Humphry Ward, had lately come to dislike the name of Rebecca West, as since 1911 she had been publishing acidic reviews in women's rights publications and literary journals such as the Freewoman and the English Review. These reviews were insightful, entertaining, and vividly expressed. They

were certainly not respectful, as Mary Ward knew to her cost, having been dismissed as "pretentious" and with barely "one gleam of horse-sense" (YR 14, 16).

West's critical biography of James was not a commercial success. It sold barely 600 copies and ruffled feathers among the literary establishment for its audacity of judgment. However, as the first substantial assessment of James's oeuvre after his death, this slight volume was instrumental in outlining the terms of James's critical legacy. West's book also demonstrates the impact that James's work had on the young writers of the generation who rose to prominence after his death. Characteristically, West does not temper the power of her wit, and her book is often understood as a withering attack on James. However, to overlook her admiration for much of his writing, and for the mind behind it, is to miss the point. The production of West's Henry James was bound up with a turbulent period in her own life, during which she was negotiating her identity both as a writer and as an independent woman, partly in response to her long-term relationship with H. G. Wells. However, this text was much more than an apprenticeship piece. By reviewing James through the lens of a more modern sensibility, West not only affirmed that James's fiction contained something of lasting value, she also traced a connecting thread from the aesthetic world of James's generation to that of her own. In so doing, she identified something central to the force of fiction.

"Rebecca West" was the literary persona of Cicely Fairfield, a young woman of Scot-Irish parentage, raised in London and Edinburgh with two sisters. Despite her middle-class upbringing and education, Cissy, as she was called, had known trouble. Her father had abandoned the family and he later died in poverty. Her mother had health difficulties and was regularly hospitalized. As a teenager, Cissy was an enthusiastic suffragette and left George Watson's Ladies' College early. She enrolled in drama school in London, but dropped out before completing her first year. It would have been hard to predict that this vivacious and rebellious young woman would in time become one of the most powerful literary voices of her generation: as a critic, a novelist, and a political commentator. Her early assets were a keen eye, a bold disregard for rank or reputation, and a striking command of language. The name of Rebecca West, adopted chiefly to appease her mother's anxieties about publicity, also allowed Fairfield to disregard the usual constraints placed on young middle-class women to maintain decorum and modify their opinions (Glendinning 36). Ibsen's character thus started out as Fairfield's mouthpiece but quickly became much more, and she began to use the name in her personal life as well as on paper. Through her involvement in suffragist politics and the Fabian Society, West quickly began to acquire influential contacts in the literary scene. These included established figures such as George Bernard Shaw, Ford Madox Ford, and

Violet Hunt, but also other new talents such as Compton Mackenzie, May Sinclair, and Wyndham Lewis. By the time that she contracted with Nesbit and Company to write a short volume on James for their Writers of the Day series, West, still in her early twenties, had earned enough of a serious reputation to justify the commission. She was, however, a risky choice.

One of the risky things about Rebecca West was her personal life, which was rapidly becoming complicated. In 1912, West was invited to lunch at the home of H. G. Wells and his second wife, Jane. West had robustly reviewed Wells's novel Marriage, and he was both impressed and intrigued by the outspoken nineteen-year-old critic. Years later he recalled, "I had never met anything quite like her before, and I doubt if there ever was anything like her before. Or ever will be again" (WL 95). Over the coming months they flirted, they argued, and they wrote to each other. In the autumn of 1913, they became lovers. After their second encounter, Rebecca discovered she was pregnant. "It was entirely unpremeditated," Wells wrote later. "It should not have happened, and since I was the experienced person, the blame is wholly mine" (WL 96). This sounds magnanimous, and it is true that Wells was openly progressive in his attitudes to women's political and social position and a champion of contraception. However, he was also a serial womaniser. His previous affairs with Violet Hunt, Dorothy Richardson, and Elizabeth von Arnim were passing events in a continuous stream of infidelities and sexual

experiments. His romantic memoir Wells in Love, written late in life and not published until 1984, reveals a man unashamed at having used his fame, wealth, and social standing to dominate women in one dysfunctional relationship after another. West, in the end, would defy domination. Nevertheless, in 1913, she hoped that Wells would leave his wife and marry her. He promised to support her and found lodgings for her in Hunstanton, a quiet town in Norfolk, where she could have her child away from the London gossip. It was here that Anthony West was born on August 4, 1914, the day on which Britain declared war against Germany. It was also here that West began work on Henry James, although the bulk of it would be written in 1915, at Quinbury farmhouse in Hertfordshire, which Wells rented for West and the baby--only twelve miles from his family home Easton Glebe, so that he could visit more easily. Jane Wells was aware of this arrangement (WL 99). What she felt about it remains unclear.

West read and researched thoroughly. The publishers Macmillan lent her a complete set of the New York Edition to assist the project (Henry James 5). This would have been easily arranged through the agency of J. B. Pinker who represented West as well as James. Pinker also helped her with the completion of an extensive bibliography of James's works (119-26). In preparation, West explored widely in James's criticism, travel writing, and autobiography and began to organize her approach. In February 1915, she published a

review of Notes on Novelists (1914) in the New Republic, "Reading Henry James in Wartime," sections of which would find their way into Henry James. In this essay, she recounts immersing herself in James's literary criticism for "intellectual cover" while a zeppelin circled overhead, perhaps at Hunstanton, ("Reading" 98). However, as Rachel Bryan notes elsewhere in this volume, this location is disputed. Commenting on the change in James's style over the course of his career, she expressed irritation with James's intensified search for discrimination and exactness of expression in his later writings: "He splits hairs till there are no longer any hairs to split, and the mental gesture becomes merely the making of agitated passes over a complete and disconcerting baldness" (99). That this sentence would survive almost intact into the later book suggested that West felt it hit the mark (Henry James 116). Nevertheless, as this article unfolds, she works through and transcends her irritation at James's "inhuman incapacity for enthusiasm." The throb of the zeppelin engine overhead reminds her that enthusiasm is perhaps not the best of human qualities. In contrast to the passions of war, the "faith in the intellect" that James represents is just what one needs to counteract the terror of an air-raid and the larger incoherence of war ("Reading" 100).

Alongside her voracious reading, West also had a valuable resource in the figure of Wells, who had known James as a

friend since the 1890s. For many years, Wells and Jane had lived in Spade House in Sandgate, within visiting distance of James's home, Lamb House in Rye. They had mutual friends in Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and Stephen Crane. However, their views on fiction were, as Wells later admitted, always "at cross purposes" (Experiment 488). He complained that James had "no idea of the idea of the possible use of the novel as a help to conduct," but thought of the novel "as an Art Form and of novelists as artists of a very special and exalted type" (489). In contrast, Wells boasted that he was "disposed to regard a novel as about as much an art form as a market place or a boulevard" (489). In the summer of 1915, this difference of opinion boiled over into a full-blown row.

Since December 1914, Wells had been working intermittently on a literary satire, Boon. This was ostensibly the work of the fictitious "Reginald Bliss," who was in turn the supposed editor and executor of the papers of the late George Boon. Wells, however, could not resist penning an Introduction that made the book's origins clear to anyone not yet in on the joke. Wells clearly considered the project a light-hearted spree, a distraction from the emotional intensity of his involvement with the War Propaganda Bureau. Boon was, he confessed later, "just a waste-paper basket," and he admitted that his ideas could have been presented "with a better grace" (Correspondence 430). However, Wells was nettled by many years of receiving James's judgment on his own work--

both publicly and privately. James had recently taken Wells to task over the flimsiness of the characters in Marriage, the same novel that West had initially criticized in 1912 (Experiment 488-494). Wells planned to use Boon's fictional discourse to turn the tables on James. Boon describes James as "the culmination of the Superficial type" (Boon 102). He complains that James's characters "never make lusty love, never go to angry war, never shout at an election or perspire at poker" (106). The subjects of his novels were like "a church lit but without a congregation to distract you, with every light and line focused on the high altar. And on this altar, very reverently placed, intensely there, is a dead kitten, an egg-shell, a bit of string" (107). According to Boon, reading James was like watching "a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea which has got into a corner of its den" (108).

Early in July 1915, James dropped into the Reform Club in London, where he found a parcel waiting for him. It contained loose-leaf sheets of Boon, which Wells had sent him to read. But James was in no mood to take a joke. He was busy with arrangements to renounce his American nationality and become a British citizen. He was involved in war charity activities. When he could find time, he was working on his essay on Rupert Brooke, which would appear as the preface to Brooke's posthumous volume of essays Letters from America (1916). James



was anxious for news of his valet Burgess Noakes, who had enlisted and was serving at the Front. James's health was unsteady, and he was prone to bouts of depression. He also found the emotional burden of the War exhausting (Hutchison, 110-14). James was hurt and bewildered by Boon. He wrote to Wells that the text had "naturally not filled [him] with a fond elation" (LHJ II, 503). Nevertheless, James seems at this stage to have been still looking for common ground with Wells. James admitted that he had his limitations, but stoutly defended his right to present life the way that he saw it. He concluded with an image that recalls the metaphor of the House of Fiction, stating that the beauty of the fictional form was that it "opens such widely different windows of attention" (505). Wells wrote back that his view of art was--and always had been--incompatible with James's. "To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use" (Correspondence 430). James wrote again to explain that Wells had missed the point: "But I have no view of life and literature . . . other than that our form of [the novel] in especial is admirable exactly by its range and variety, its plasticity and liberality" (LHJ, II 506). He wound up with what has become a much-quoted statement: "it is Art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process" (508). Wells wrote back to say that he could not see

what that meant: "I don't clearly understand your concluding phrases--which shews no doubt how completely they define our difference." (qtd. in LHJ II, 505). James did not reply.

This then, was the context in which West was working on her critical biography of James in the spring and summer of 1915. It is difficult to imagine either that this context had no impact on West's work or that her engagement with James's life and work made no impression on Wells. However, despite the sharpness of her humor, West draws a more perceptive and generous picture of James than Wells does--probably because her own view of art was already much closer to James's focus on form than it was to Wells's preoccupation with function. As she developed her own creative voice, this closeness would only increase. Henry James tells the story of James's creative life in five chapters: "The Sources," in which West sets the scenery of James's youth; "The International Situation," which outlines his early development as an essayist and novelist; "Transition," in which James makes his mark on the literary landscape through novels such as Washington Square and The Portrait of a Lady; "The Crystal Bowl," which explores the tales and novels of the 1890s; and "The Golden Bowl," in which West charts James's stylistic decline, as she perceives it, into self-consciousness and verbosity. West habitually wrote with a sharp pen--it was her trademark. The more revered the author, the more piercing her stiletto. One early review opened with the comment: "Writers on the subject of August

Strindberg have hitherto omitted to mention that he could not write" (YR 53). Later, she would describe James Joyce as an author who "pushes his pen around noisily and aimlessly as if it were a carpet sweeper, whose technique is a tin can tied to the tail of the dog of his genius" (Necessity 57). James was not likely to escape such censure.

West characterizes James as the kind of American who "could never feel at home until he was in exile" (Henry James 9) and describes the young Henry and his brother William as "two charming little boys in tight trousers and brass-buttoned jackets, one of whom grew up to write fiction as though it were philosophy and the other to write philosophy as though it were fiction" (11). She is regularly frustrated by James's lack of direct expression, especially in his late writing. She laments that his sentence, which was once "a straight young thing that could run wherever it liked," later became "a delicate creature as swathed in relative clauses as an invalid in shawls" (41). However, West reserves her sharpest invective for The Golden Bowl (1904), which she dismisses as a "cartload of apes and ivory" (113). However, she also notes perceptively that James's mature style derives from his use of dictation as a mode of composition and suggests that the reader might understand his late works not as novels but as an extension of the conversation which so delighted him in his social world: At last it became a passion with him, and he decided to converse, not only with his friends, but with his public. This

was bad for his novels, so long as one considered them as such. . . . But once one considers them as a flow of bright things said about people Mr James knows and that one rather thinks one has met, but is not quite sure, one perceives that the crystal bowl of Mr James's art was not, as one had feared, broken. He had but gilded its clear sides with the gold of his genius for phrase-making, and now, instead of lifting it with a priest-like gesture to exhibit a noble subject, held it on his knees as a treasured piece of bric-a-brac and tossed into it, with an increasing carelessness, any sort of subject--a jewel, a rose, a bit of string, a visiting card--confident that the surrounding glow would lend it beauty. (115)

There it is again, that bit of string, which appeared in Boon's diatribe--and surely no coincidence. It seems likely that West and Wells shared notes and ideas as they wrote, and while one might assume that the younger writer borrowed this image from the older, the evidence in this case points the other way. Certainly, the lexical blend of mysticism with quirky precision that occurs in both "string" passages is much more characteristically Westian than it is Wellsian. In Boon's attack on James, the "lit church" and the "high altar" appear from nowhere, following on from a conversation about how James relates the novel to pictorial art, whereas West's descriptions of James's writing are flooded throughout with the language of ritual and belief. In her earlier New Republic article, she had called his late style "the altar of a bloody

sacrifice, on which everything that had in the past made Mr. James's prose living and radiant, a glorious part of the organic world, had been ruthlessly offered up to an increasing fineness of meaning" ("Reading" 99). West's bitter frustration at James's later style is highly quotable; however, the balance of her view is always weighted toward admiration, especially when she deals with his works of the 1890s. For example, West describes "The Altar of the Dead" (1895) as of so perfect a beauty that one can read every separate paragraph every day of one's life for the music of the sentences and the loveliness of the presented images, which takes ritual from the trembling hands of the coped old men and exhibits it as something that those who love the natural frame of things and hate superstition need not fear to accept.

(Henry James 100)

The idea that writing is an act of reverence, whether sincere and thus valuable or overblown and thus ridiculous, is a recurring conceptual metaphor in West's view of James.

Boon's "bit of string" sits on its altar alongside two random objects--a dead kitten and an egg-shell--that connote little more in relation to James's work than a sense of sterility and pathos. However, West's "bit of string" is tossed into a gilded crystal bowl with more resonant items: a jewel, a rose, and a visiting card--objects that do show up regularly within James's fiction and criticism, either as items within a plot, such as the golden bowl itself, or as

metaphors of significance. Consider the description of Paris in The Ambassadors as "some huge iridescent object, a jewel brilliant and hard" (AB 55) or the "flower of art" that blooms in the deep soil of civilisation in James's Hawthorne (HA 23). Even that bit of string may not be as inconsequential as it seems. James tells us something important about his fictional method when he describes Maria Gostrey in the preface to The Ambassadors as a ficelle--literally a bit of string--whose role is to operate as an "aid to lucidity" and provide a thread to guide the reader through the events of the plot (557). Unlike Boon, West has at least caught the register of James's metaphors in her choice of the four items that she imagines in James's crystal bowl. Or, after working methodically through the prefaces to the New York Edition in preparation for her project, she may be making a more deliberate statement about James's art. Four short pages earlier, West notes how in James's late work "the metaphors are so beautifully and completely presented to the mind that it retains them as having as real and physical an existence as the facts" (Henry James 112). By choosing items that James himself identifies as metaphors for the act of writing, West reinforces her view that latterly James's writings--including the prefaces--seem primarily concerned with their own artifice, whereas what matters to West, and what she sees at work in his earlier work, is the ability of literature to illuminate life. Developing a metaphor that she had earlier

crafted for "Reading Henry James in Wartime," she laments that James's prose eventually ceases to have the beauty of a living thing, but rather the "made" beauty which bases its claims to admiration chiefly on its ingenuity, like those crystal clocks with jewelled works and figures moving as the hours chimed, which were the glory of mediaeval palaces. (Henry James 116)

As West sees it, the fine "phrase-making" of the late style is no substitute for the mystery of a "noble subject" (115).

West's 'bit of string' thus belongs within a more calculated and vibrant pattern of thought about James's fiction. It is Wells's reductive version that lacks the authenticity and color of an original image and betrays the shaky lines of a copy.

Ironically, however, in identifying James's tendency to allow his metaphors at times to dominate his language, West singles out a trait that is also central to her own developing style, as the elaborate metaphors of the crystal clock or the gilded bowl of James's art testify. Much of the wry humor in West's writing rests on her ability to craft metaphors that catch her sense of the incongruity of attitudes and values that others might take more seriously. West's extended metaphors often articulate a subtle difference or a surprising observation. For example, in her 1912 essay "Spinsters and Art," she notes,

The baldness and badness of popular novels is as touching as the ugliness of a cherished rag doll. What overflowing tenderness must be in the heart of the child who loves this monstrosity, we think. And so with the people who read these novels--what tireless imaginations they must have, to perceive joy in these bare chronicles! (YR, 42)

While more sophisticated readers are waiting around for the next masterpiece by Hardy or Conrad, the reader of the poor-quality novel, West argues, will take up the "puppet heroine" of some low-brow story and project beauty and grace onto her as does a child with a doll (YR, 42). For West, however, this extended metaphor reveals not the reader's childishness and poor taste but his imaginative creativity. "In a sense," she concludes, "he writes his own books" (YR 42).

West's fascination and frustration with James's metaphors can thus be understood as an example of what Harold Bloom terms "the anxiety of influence," a conscious rejection of a particularly powerful element of one's personal literary heritage. As such, West's need to undermine James's authority is part of her own self-fashioning as a writer, a process in which she spars with the great novelist and in so doing acquires some of his cultural capital for herself. Indeed, James's Hawthorne (1879) is fuelled by that same mix of reverence and ruthless incision that we see in West's Henry James. However, Bloom's model of "influence" is not the only way of understanding West's relationship to the writers of the



previous generation against whom she wished to define herself. Influence suggests a passive attitude from the younger writer, whereas West felt that her elders had plenty of lessons still to learn that only the young could teach. In "The Duty of Harsh Criticism," an article written for the New Republic in November 1914, West insists on the need for "a new and abusive school of criticism" to counter the lack of proper critical debate in British life ("Duty" 18). "There is," she asserts, "merely a chorus of weak cheers, a piping note of appreciation that is not stilled unless a book is suppressed by the police" (18). What is required to reinvigorate the cultural scene is the act of "listening to our geniuses in a disrespectful manner" (19). She goes on to offer "correction" to two of the great writers of the day: G. B. Shaw and H. G. Wells, one a dear friend, the other her lover. Clearly, for West, criticism was a form of affectionate raillery for those close to her as much as it was a sacred duty to art.

During the years of the First World War, West's own mind and confidence were developing apace. No sooner had she finished her book on James than she wrote her first novel, The Return of the Soldier (1917), the story of a forty-something man caught between three different women and haunted by the past. It secured her career as a writer and remains her most popular work. It would be followed by scores of reviews and articles, ten more novels, and another nine books of non-fiction. Toward the end of the war, West also began to realize

that Wells would always remain emotionally unavailable and that he had no intention of giving up the security and convenience of his life with Jane. West moved back to London with Anthony, although she never adjusted comfortably to motherhood. She continued to see Wells and to socialize with him in literary circles. However, it also became obvious that Wells increasingly viewed her literary success with resentment and that they differed profoundly in their approaches to art. In maturity, Wells increasingly devoted himself to historical and scientific inquiries, to works on society and politics. West continued to believe in the power of fiction to create new perspectives. It would be the mid-1920s before West would gather her confidence to make a final break from their sexual relationship, and through Anthony, who worshipped his famous, capricious father, she was connected to him for life.

In 1928, West published a book of essays on literature, Strange Necessity. It took on many of the literary giants of the day, including James Joyce, Arnold Bennett, G. B. Shaw, and Wells himself, whose literary persona was characterized as a middle-aged uncle seated at the drawing-room piano and "warbling in too fruity a tenor" and whose prose was likely to suddenly lose its firmness and "shake like a blanc-mange" (200). Joyce is dismissed as "a great man who is entirely without taste" and whose work is blighted by "gross sentimentality"--by which West means a laziness in construction and a glib striving after effect. Art should be

more selective, she argues. It should offer something that is at once more detached and more personal. Literature is like painting, and West describes it in metaphors of landscape and architecture not unlike those of James himself. She writes: "I do not think we can exaggerate the fundamental unity of all art and all experience. In both alike the individual is examining his environment to see what chances of survival it affords him" (Strange 190). Art is "the great human game," the process by which we tell ourselves the narratives of life: "and it follows that all works of art are valuable to any human being who is part of the civilization that produced them. They will confirm his own researches into a common problem" (191). This does not sound so very different from James's assertion that it is "art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance." Both express a similar view of the artist as one who articulates the value of human experience. Wells, predictably, disliked West's book. He wrote to her that Strange Necessity was "ambitious and pretentious," and he derided her attempt to fuse scientific and imaginative approaches to knowledge. Wells wrote that her criticism, like her fiction, was the product of "a beautiful voice and a keen and sensitive mind doing 'Big Thinks' to the utmost of her ability--which is nil" (qtd. in Glendinning 118). Thirteen years on from the quarrel with James, Wells still could not see what it meant to prize literature as a route to wisdom rather than as a tool of political use. West may have been

intimately involved in Wells and James's quarrel about the nature of art, but in the end it became clear which side she was on.

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